

Snake

“Not one of the serious ones,” I said
repenting of the fact I had informed
upon that bright slithering stripling
which was not cobra, adder or mamba.
Snatching the child up, I’d spoken
out of force of circumstance
not seriously intending
to set them hunting and killing it,
and as luck would have it the snake escaped
into the thick green creepers shrouding the house.

It’s not a special interest in the snake
that wounds me now, remembering it,
but my lethal speech, spilling out
and nearly capsizing that slim arc,
sensitive as if it were all fingertips,
its flickering tongue an imprecation,
or, to gods other than ours, a prayer.

What could have made me speak like that?
Not education, for I did not denounce it,
but a sort of slippery reflex, tainted
as the snake itself never was, words
that come skirmishing into the air
doing violence to their speaker,
until he lies, like a snake, crushed and useless.

HAROLD FARMER